

THE NEW COMMUNITY IN CHRIST  
I Laity Equipped for Ministry

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Introduction

It is difficult to find anyone who is not for lay ministry. Church literature has supported it for the last twenty years or longer. Every pastor-chaplain prays for more lay efforts in congregation and community. Yet, for the most part, lay activity is confined to support roles in congregations.

There is a gap between what the church says and what it actually does in support of the community of believers. The church speaks in idealistic terms that all believers are called to be ministers. But when it comes to reality, the church has been doing little to support the laity in their real life's situation. There is a gap between Sunday faith and the week day world. The church encourages lay ministry solely within the church; in teaching, in visiting, in giving money, and in serving on committees. Unless the laity is equipped to live and serve in the real world the formal structure of the church will collapse.

The church is dedicated to the principle of "coming" and "going." The effectiveness of a congregation should be measured by the degree to which people are gathered to receive the power of Jesus and to the degree to which people go out and share that power with others. Yet, there is an almost exclusive concentration on programs which gather believers. We question, "How many came?"

It appears to be that the majority of major denominations in America are in serious trouble. They are losing members, overseas work is disappearing, inner city parishes are dwindling and financial support is shrinking. Some brave prophets rejoice in the fact that traditional church structures are crumbling. When church organizations become too large, too formalistic, clergy dominated, too oblivious of the church's mission, only then can God's people get back to basics.

The state of the church can be compared to Noah's Ark. It might smell and leak. But look at the alternatives. How else can we survive the flood? We can't dump the church. We are the church. If we don't like what's happening, the forms and structures, then we must continue to be the new community, the people of God, through whom new changes can come about. Needed are ways and means for us to be equipped for ministry.

#### The Christian Community-Its Origin and Historical Development

However, in calling and challenging all church people for their ministry, it is essential to take first a brief look at the Christian community, its origin and historical development for almost 2000 years. Only then can we better understand what the community of believers, under God, can be in the future.

#### In the Gospels

The pattern for the Christian community has its roots in the life of Jesus Christ and his followers. In his own life and in the life of the Christian community in the gospels, Jesus presented to the whole world a radically new life style. He called his followers to imitate his life. This style is best summarized in Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man

did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."

Jesus rejects the suggestion of James and John that the community organization be based on the hierarchical model of rank and prestige. To be chief means to be servant of all. To serve means to wash feet and finally to carry the cross.

God's purpose in Christ is, "to redeem many people." This means simply that God in Christ pays the ransom price and frees men of all ages from all oppressions which keep them from being the sort of people that God wants them to be. This is the good news which Jesus announced when he began his ministry. "The right time has come and the kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the good news!" Mark 1:15.

Jesus invites people to come into a relationship with him. As a result of this encounter something is expected to happen. Association with him enables the believer to receive the teachings, power and inspiration which ultimately produces a new person. The new community is formed.

But along with the invitation to "come" is the ever present instruction to "go." Once people have the vision they are instructed to go and minister to others the same way that Jesus ministered to them. Interestingly, the last recorded words of Christ are his final instructions for his followers to go into the world on his behalf. This balance between "calling together" and "sending out" clearly characterizes the first community. Jesus gathers the faithful to receive power and scatters the faithful to spread that power.

Careful consideration should be given to the method in which Jesus sent out his disciples. The Gospels report that he sent them out two by

two. Jesus always worked with a community and found community life important. In moments of crisis he surrounded himself with the Christian community. Jesus knew that his followers would also need some organized structure for supporting each other in ministry. Jesus is the originator of Christian support groups.

Note well the wide range of Jesus' ministry when he announces, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Luke 4:18. Healing hurt, proclaiming good news, setting free, restoring; these activities mark the style of Jesus' ministry. It is into this ministry of freeing and healing that he calls his disciples.

Note again there is no priority in the task, which is most important; preaching or healing? Jesus instructed them to do both. "Go and preach. The Kingdom of Heaven is near. Heal the sick." Matthew 10:7.

In today's terms the twelve disciples could be considered nothing more nor less than lay persons. They had not been formally trained to be ministers of God. They had not been ordained into a professional calling of the church. They were followers of Jesus, "called together" to do his ministry.

#### In the New Testament

The new community literally has its beginning in baptism. It is through baptism that we are united "into Christ" and become in the phrase of Luther, "little Christs." In baptism the believer dies to sin, is raised to new life and given grace to imitate Christ. Paul used the phrase

"in Christ" almost 170 times for it best describes the life of the community.

The life of the New Testament community is best described in five basic functions or actions.

1. Worship - praising God for his gift of life and offering themselves, in grateful response, as his servants in the world.
2. Fellowship - that process of building up the community by taking that which is private (not only material goods but spiritual gifts) and offering it for the common good.
3. Witness - literally means to make Christ present to another by ones words and deeds.
4. Service - serving not only the needs of Christians but all people so that they may have a more abundant life.
5. Nurture - includes education, but is more. The best definition is that it is the sum total of those experiences that turn children into adults.

There was no attempt in the early church to list these five functions in an order of importance. They were all equally important. Each depended on the other. Paul's letters clearly indicate that the early church seriously dealt with the ministry of all believers. Ministry belonged to everyone. Everyone had a special gift which was recognized and utilized for the building up of community. 1 Cor. 12:4; Eph. 4:11.

The role of the leader in the community was clearly understood. To Paul his task was to equip the saints for ministry. His style was not authoritarian or heavy handed; but rather low-key and democratic so that all the gifts in the community could be developed and utilized.

The fellowships were probably quite small, probably no more than 25 people. They met in homes. Their ability to understand, to love and to care for each other was great.

#### In the Post-New Testament

For over 300 years the Christian community, though not large, preserved its New Testament character. However, after Emperor Constantine granted Christianity the right to exist, the life style of the Christian community underwent radical changes. For the most part, the model of the early New Testament community all but disappeared.

Some of these distortions were:

- The individual Christian generally lost his sense of vocation and calling to imitate Christ.
- The intimate small communities which were concerned for each other's spiritual life all but disappeared.
- Christian service became impersonal, administered by the institutional church.
- The role of the pastor changed. He was no longer an enabling leader, but one who exercised authority.
- Worship remained strong, but with the pastor alone doing the preaching and administering the sacraments.
- The church became primarily concerned with saving souls and ignored the needy.
- The idea that one was baptized for the life of the world disappeared.
- Holy communion became an "in-house" celebration without any significance for the needs of the world.

As a result of these distortions, the church as we know it first hand today is often unrecognizable from the first Christian community. All this may be either good or bad, the worst of times or the best of times, depending upon one's point of view.

#### A Case Study of One Attempt to Be the New Community

Personally, on the basis of my ministry as a transplanted expatriate missionary of 17 years in South Korea and now serving for the past five years as parish pastor in the Pacific Northwest, I find these to be exciting times in the life of Christ's church. A revolution is taking place. People of God at the grass root levels are coming up with some new, fresh and workable alternatives to the status quo. They are discovering that the traditional church, though almost 2000 years old, can, nevertheless, be "the new community in Christ."

Several years ago members in my parish introduced a new program which has radically reshaped my understanding of what the community in Christ can really be. The Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Portland, Oregon, is a typical, middle-class congregation of approximately 600 adults. We carry on all the traditional programs of education, evangelism, worship, fellowship and service. And yet, in spite of all the many church programs we have so many members with a half-hearted enthusiasm, partial commitment, a reluctance to get totally involved. As pastor, my biggest concern has been how I can effectively put to work the many talents. I tried something I had never done before. I invited six busy men to share with me their honest feelings about their membership in the church. Typical of the response I heard was, "Somehow the church and its activities don't speak to the real world I live and work in. My faith life and my real life don't

always meet. I need a support structure to help me grow in Christ."

That is how the Friday morning breakfast group got started. Now every Friday morning 15 to 20 men meet at 6:00 a.m. to intimately share real life concerns - a doctor, teacher, salesman, factory worker. The first objective of this group is to know one another. They share who they are; what they feel; what they hope and dream; where they hurt, doubt and fear. Having built relationships on trust and mutual understanding they can now respond to each others' needs with the "Good News" of Christ. Men who had never prayed openly were surprised that they can now pray for one another. Busy men discovered they have the time to share their faith. A truck salesman now leads the group.

From this experiment we questioned, "What would happen if we could get the whole congregation similarly involved?" As a result the home fellowship program was developed. Today twelve individual groups of 15 to 20 members each meet on an on-going basis in evening home fellowships. Busy men and women are discovering that life in the church can be exciting. The aim of each group is for everyone to really get to know each other. Only as one shares intimately and personally can the ministry of caring, nurture and healing take place. Every member has a unique gift to share for the mutual upbuilding of the group. As a result of the small group fellowships new energy has been released for the strengthening of the total fellowship.

And, interestingly, the laity is doing it all. Because members know each other's needs well, exciting ministry is happening; the sick visited, a widow comforted, an alcoholic encouraged, an unhappy couple counselled, the unchurched neighbor invited, the inactive member brought into the

fellowship again. As each small group within the congregation engages in the essential functions of nurture, witnessing, service, fellowship and worship, the vitality of the New Testament church is recaptured and the new community in Christ restored.

The small support group model in my congregation has led me to some tentative conclusions:

1. The congregation must learn to change its strategies to meet changing needs. Isaiah said over 3000 years ago, "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing....Do you perceive it?" In other words, the old things are not necessarily better. People, and especially pastors, do not like changes in the church. Yet bold experimentation is vitally needed.
2. There is a need for more personalized care. Treatment in medicine is always on a one-to-one basis. For education to have its maximum results there must be a one-to-one relationship between student and teacher. The congregation which specializes in ministry to people must also be on a one-to-one basis if there is to be vitality and growth.
3. This is the day of the layman-priest. God has called his church to be a royal priesthood. This means that every believer, as priest, gives God's grace and healing to people. Each Christian must be a resource to the other person.
4. Lay ministry is needed wherever there are hurting people. Problems facing people are many and diverse; medical, emotional, financial, family, business, marriage, losing a loved one, re-

jection of a lover, retirement, loss of job, etc. A network of Christian people can best address the problem of human hurt, particularly where they relate to each other on a continuing basis.

5. Love is the best medicine for the sickness of the world. This kind of love is not learned in a professional school. Love is something that each Christian can receive and each can give.
6. Non-professionals can be good counselors. Dr. Paul Tournier, a famous therapist, once remarked when asked how he counsels, "I don't know how to help people. I don't do anything at all. What is important is that people find in me a true friend, someone in whom they can confide." Loving and trusting people, who know how to listen, can be effective resources for others.
7. However, this is not to say that structured programs for equipping the laity for the person-to-person ministry as "peer counselors" are not essential. In my parish steps are now being taken to introduce "The Stephen Series" program in which individuals are sensitized to help others in pain, loss and grieving. This program seeks to educate individuals to serve as listeners, visitors, counselors and helpers to people who are hurting. (Note: More information on the Stephen Series can be had by writing to William McKay, Program Director, FCTM, 7120 Lindell Boulevard, St. Louis, Mo. 63130)
8. The most effective contacts are not in the formal church setting. We meet people in the market places, in schools, on the job, at parties, at meetings, etc. In everyday situations we have the power to bless and heal those with whom we come in contact.

9. These "little churches" within the church have helped increase the worship attendance and the support of the programs of the total congregation.
10. As pastor, I must drastically change the priorities of my ministry. As an enabler, I must spend more time selectively training and helping the leaders of the small home groups.

#### Apostles International

As we've talked about the "New Community in Christ," where it has come from and where it is today, we question, "Where will it be tomorrow?" This depends, in part, on our vision of the church, of what it should be and can be under Christ. Convinced as I have become in recent years of the great and far reaching potential of a laity trained for ministries, I am reminded of this optimistic prediction, "Eighty or a hundred years hence there will be very few heathen left." Such was the hope of a missionary writing seventy-five years ago. That was the year of the great missionary, John R. Mott, who had captivated the Christian world with the slogan, "the evangelization of the world in this generation."

The high hopes of an earlier generation might seem dashed to the ground today. Far from having evangelized the world, the Christian church is an increasingly small minority in the world. Missionary Mott could hardly have imagined that within two generations the world population would nearly double, or that by the last quarter of the twentieth century a "population explosion" would be multiplying the non-Christian world nearly ten times as fast as the Christian.

In the face of such formidable forces we may find ourselves hesitant and uncertain about how best to respond, if at all, to the mission mandate,

"Go therefore and make disciples..." How can we make a meaningful attempt to carry out the Great Commission in our day? From my vantage point as a long term expatriate missionary-reserve chaplain serving in South Korea from 1958-1975 and now more recently as parish pastor-reserve chaplain in the United States, I, too, foster the optimistic dream of John Mott. However, the fulfillment of that dream will come about only as the apostolic character of the church is restored and as the church rediscovers that its life is mission. Increasingly, all of God's people must see themselves as having a vital role to play in the church's mission. The question each Christian must ask is not, "What is the church?" or "Where is the church?", but "Am I the church?" Then only does one realize that the borders of the mission frontiers have disappeared and that the church does not just send out missionaries, but we shall all be missionaries.

Perhaps nothing hinders the outreach of the church quite so much as the scheme whereby the professional clergy are pictured as those who go out and make converts while the role of laymen is solely one of providing (financial) support. Let's reverse the roles! The laymen are the front-line troops meeting the unbelieving world. The chaplain-missionary-pastor provides (spiritual) support for the lay people in their roles as ministers of the Word of reconciliation.

Our point is well illustrated by that New Testament pair, Aquila and Priscilla, whose dual roles as tentmakers and roving missionaries are highly suggestive for our own mobile age.

This couple first appears in Corinth, where they had fled in the face of the imperial edict driving all Jews out of Rome. From there they accompanied missionary Paul to Ephesus, where they lent their home as a worship

place to the young church. 1 Cor. 16:19. Later they took in tow the learned and eloquent Apollos, who had missed learning about the baptism instituted by Christ, and "expounded to him the way of God more accurately." Acts 18:26. Some time later Aquila and his wife are back in Rome and once again their home is a meeting place for Christians. Rom. 16:3-5.

One thing is clear about these people: If they were part of the "international set" of their day, they were no mere cosmopolitan tramps. Whatever other reasons of politics or business took them to various places in the Mediterranean world, they made their moves count for the church of Christ. At each new locale they became the focal point for the gathering of Christians, and they played to the hilt their role as ministers of the Gospel.

The parallel to the 1980's is obvious. American Christians by the hundreds of thousands travel abroad every year. We are not here thinking of tourists, but of people who spend longer periods overseas in military service, in government positions, or in business. It is conservatively estimated that for every one professional missionary living overseas there are over 250 lay people scattered around the globe. Do we recognize in them a great potential force of lay missionaries at work after the pattern of Aquila and Priscilla? Does the chaplain realize his essential role in equipping the laity for mission and ministry?

"Apostles International" - lay apostles at home and abroad, a worldwide community centered in the person of Christ, can add a dynamic dimension to the church's impact on today's world. What a great thing the church might be, but only as we become what we already are, "the new community in Christ."